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SUBJECT: ERADICATION OF COCA -- GOOD NEWS FROM MANY FRONTS

REFS: A)SEP 2008 ONCDP PRESS RELEASE ON COLOMBIA COKE PRODUCTION
B)NOV 2008 USG PUBLICATION, ILLICIT DRUG PRODUCING NATIONS
C)BOGOTA 673, ERADICATION WRAP UP 2008
D)FEB 2009 DEA LATEST STRIDE DATA ON PRICE AND PURITY
E)APR 2009 DEA PUBLICATION ON DECREASING COCA PRODUCTIVITY
F)08 BOGOTA 1921, ERADICATION HURTS FARC FINANCES

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the last year numerous surveys, studies, and serious field reports have come out touting the success of eradication in reducing the amount of cocaine produced, the funding available to narcoterrorists, the amount of coca leaf available, and the amount of coca under cultivation. This reporting has been especially positive in pointing to the major contribution of aerial eradication. The most recent report from DEA Breakthrough says, "Sustained eradication is necessary to reduce financial incentives to grow coca." The information in this cable is from multiple sources. It is very positive and confirms that aerial eradication is making a difference, and that it should be considered an important component of our consolidated counternarcotics policy in Colombia, along with manual eradication, alternative development, judicial reform, and police/military assistance. END SUMMARY

ERADICATION WITHERS PRODUCTION OF COCA 24 PERCENT

2. (U) In September 2008, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), using the latest scientific information from DEA and the Crime and Narcotics Center (CNC), published a press release (REF A) stating, "...eradication pressure is withering the productivity of existing coca fields." The press release also stated that, "Based on our new understanding of the impact of eradication, we can now calculate that Colombia's maximum potential production of pure cocaine has fallen fully 24 percent since its high point in 2001." The study's basic findings are that continued aerial and manual eradication reduce the productivity of coca fields by reducing the number of plants in a field and forcing replanting with immature plants that are less productive than mature plants. Recent data not included in this analysis suggests that the cocaine production potential for Colombia will keep falling as long as the eradication pressure continues.

3. (U) The November 8 USG publication (REF B) entitled, "Illicit Drug Producing Nations" addressed cultivation of illicit crops throughout the world. Regarding Colombia, the report said, "New field studies show that aerial eradication in Colombia has caused a

decline in yield." The study also reported, "The field surveys indicate that sprayed herbicide can reduce productivity by killing some plants in the field or causing harvests to be lost even if the entire field is not destroyed. NOTE: Aerial spray aircraft typically do not completely spray a field due to security constraints. They will normally only pass over a field once or twice, leaving unsprayed coca on the edges, or between spray swaths.

PRICE IS UP AND PURITY IS DOWN

¶4. (U) Working together, aerial and manual eradication potentially eliminated hundreds of metric tons of cocaine from the world market in 2008 (REF E) and arguably contributed to the encouraging trends in price and purity of cocaine in the U.S. and Britain. In the DEA STRIDE report (REF C) from February 24, 2009, DEA Washington reported that the price of cocaine has increased by 105 percent and purity decreased by 35 percent from January 2007 to December 2008. Similarly, British authorities reported this month that the wholesale per kilo price of cocaine in the UK has increased by nearly 30 percent from 2007 to 2009 and purity is down. Certainly law enforcement successes in recent years, including record seizures in Colombia in 2008 and significant seizures in the transit zone, played a role in producing an increase in the price and a reduction in purity of cocaine in the U.S. and Britain, but eradication also played a role in restricting supply.

MAJOR GROWING REGIONS, LESS COCA DUE TO ERADICATION

¶5. (SBU) The April 30, 2009 DEA report "Coca Eradication Proves to be a Team Marathon, not a Solo Sprint" (REF D) uses new field studies not available when REF A was published. This report's latest coca yield studies "have documented that average coca leaf yields in three major growing regions have dropped by an average of 10 percent per year over the last 2 to 5 years." The report also states that, "Sustained eradication is necessary to reduce financial incentives to grow coca, while credible alternative development options are required to create income for buying necessities that cannot be produced by the farmer. Without sustained and concurrent eradication and alternative development, farmers are unlikely to permanently abandon coca farming." NOTE: The Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) in Colombia has long advocated that the Carrot and Stick approach to eradication is the best strategy to achieve long-term success. NAS, USAID, and the Embassy Military Group are all working together on the Colo40nSwith the Embassy that coca productivity in several major coca growing regions is down sharply compared to previous years. This coincides with the DEA findings in REF D. Field teams from the GOC, the UN, and the USG have reported encountering severe coca field damage attributable to aerial eradication, difficulty locating live, productive fields and that aerial spraying was a major contributor to the reduction in coca field productivity. Sustained eradication and other law enforcement pressures have contributed to as much as a 50 percent reduction in coca productivity in select growing areas over the last several years. Coca yield experts concluded that the long-term, cumulative impact of aerial eradication is effective in reducing coca production and may pressure coca farmers to abandon coca cultivation.

UN SURVEY GOING TO SHOW 18 PERCENT LESS COCA

¶7. (SBU) While not public yet, preliminary UN reports, citing heavy eradication pressure during 2008, indicate that coca cultivation in 2008 is down by an estimated 18 percent compared to 2007. This reduction verifies reports from USG program managers and spray pilots who are reporting difficulties in finding coca. When found it is less healthy, less dense, and in smaller fields. The 2008 USG coca cultivation survey prepared by the CNC will not be released until later this year.

¶8. (SBU) The Colombian Antinarcotics Police (DIRAN) performs an annual coca monitoring exercise to track and measure coca

cultivation countrywide. This information is used by the DIRAN for targeting and is not considered the official GOC cultivation number.

The GOC uses the UN cultivation numbers as its official numbers. Data collected during overflights conducted in January 2009 reveal that coca cultivation is down by over 20 percent compared to February 2008 overflights of the same area. While DIRAN coca cultivation data are used solely for planning eradication activities and are not as rigorous as USG or UN cultivation figures, they show that coca cultivation in Colombia is trending downward.

AERIAL ERADICATION HURTS FARC FINANCES

¶9. (SBU) Post reporting (REF F) and GOC reports, based largely on documents recovered from the laptop computers of two Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) Secretariat members killed in 2008, indicate that coca eradication efforts have caused financial hardship for the organization. Communications from FARC field commanders reveal that aerial eradication has impacted the FARC's ability to generate revenue from drug trafficking activities. In one communication, a FARC leader cited that massive aerial eradication has reduced revenues from coca cultivation and production and that funds were dangerously low for maintaining FARC-run radio stations, workshops, and schools and for buying weapons and other war material. Recently, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) did a classified report dealing with such issues.

¶10. (U) Document analysis and interviews with FARC deserters conducted by the Colombian Ministry of Defense paint a compelling picture of a FARC in serious decline, in large part to de-capitalization as a consequence of sustained eradication, military pressure, and interdiction efforts. FARC deserters report that the formerly robust Eastern Bloc, concentrated in southeastern Colombia, has seen revenues from drug trafficking decline significantly and that some FARC fronts have gotten out of the drug trafficking business altogether. According to deserter accounts, aerial eradication has impacted a key source of FARC revenue by cutting coca cultivation and reducing the FARC's ability to obtain sufficient amounts of coca leaf to process into cocaine. Lack of logistical support, including food, is one of the deserter's primary reasons for leaving the FARC, although not the primary one.

FIELD STUDY AND INTERVIEWS FIND ERADICATION WORKS

¶11. (SBU) The NAS hired an experienced field researcher in conflict zones to do a study of a specific part of Colombia that has historically seen significant coca cultivation, serious violence, and a lack of GOC presence. The area has also received significant aerial eradication, as well as alternative development and military assistance. The researcher was asked to assess the effectiveness of Plan Colombia's illicit crop reduction efforts in this area of Northern Colombia. The region has long been fought over by insurgents and paramilitary groups who sought to gain control of lucrative coca production and marketing. Based on research and hundreds of field interviews, the contractor estimated that aerial eradication has reduced coca cultivation in Catatumbo by over 60 percent compared to 2001 and he also concluded that aerial spray has forced many farmers to abandon coca cultivation, reduced the profitability of the cocaine trade and led to a decrease in income for the FARC groups operating in the area. This de-capitalization has allowed the GOC public forces to significantly reduce the FARC presence in the area.

VERIFICATION MISSION SAYS SPRAYING IMPACTS COCA

¶12. (SBU) The NAS works with the GOC and other USG agencies to perform a ground-truthing verification mission for aerial eradication twice a year. The report for the 19th verification mission is not complete, but preliminary results indicate that aerial eradication is accurate and effective. The efficacy rate continued to be above 85%, which is the historical average. The lead USG Scientific Advisor, and retired USDA Soil Scientist said,

"Results of the 19th Coca Verification Mission continue to show that aerial spraying strongly impacts coca, both directly and by forcing growers to replant or prune plants. The net effect must be significant loss of coca leaf and cocaine productivity." Observations from other USG and GOC raters were consistent with this statement.

MANUAL ERADICATION HAS PLAYED A BIG ROLE

¶13. (SBU) Many of the studies and observations in this cable deal with aerial eradication. This is because they were either directly looking at aerial eradication, or they were using data going back many years before there was significant manual eradication. However, manual eradication has clearly played a role in the successes mentioned in this cable and is an important component of our consolidated counternarcotics strategy in Colombia. In 2008, the GOC manually eradicated almost 100,000 hectares, a new record. Together, manual and aerial eradication eradicated almost 230,000 hectares, also a new record. Unfortunately, the GOC is having trouble funding manual eradication. The goal for 2009 is 70,000 hectares and year-to-date the GOC has manually eradicated only about 15,000 hectares.

ERADICATION IS IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF STRATEGY

¶14. (SBU) As we have learned since the beginning of Plan Colombia, aerial eradication is not the panacea for the complex problem of illicit coca cultivation in Colombia; however, studies and reports over the last year indicate that it is effective and serves as an important tool in the fight against narcoterrorism. Post's CSDI will incorporate aerial eradication, alternative development, judicial reform, police/military assistance, and human rights assistance in a concerted fashion to try and break the cycle of drug trafficking, violence, poverty, and impunity that has plagued Colombia for decades. No single one of these tools can do the job alone, but working together, we believe they will make a difference.

BROWNFIELD